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North Chicago schools will continue to receive \$7 million in annual federal aid to districts with a heavy military presence after the federal government agreed that a law governing public-private ventures applies to a Navy housing plan, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said Monday.

District 187 receives \$6,100 per student, the highest level of "impact" aid, from the Department of Education because 30 percent of the children in its schools come from the military, mostly from the Great Lakes naval base.

But there were fears that a Navy plan to reduce the number of housing units during redevelopment would cause the student population to fall below the 30 percent threshold. That would cause the already strapped district to receive only \$770 per child, a \$7 million difference that could have doomed the district.

Instead, because of the law that says schools cannot lose their status during the privatization process, District 187 will keep its "heavily impacted" status through at least 2010, Kirk said. He released a letter from the Education Department confirming the law, but that statute has never been used, he said.

"Heavy-impact aid for North Chicago classrooms has been guaranteed for the next five years, no matter," Kirk (R-Ill.) told a crowd of several hundred people at a town hall-style meeting Monday night in Lake Bluff Middle School. "That gives us the time we need for a medium- to long-term fix."

That includes persuading the Navy to add more than 100 units to its original housing redevelopment plan, which could help the city keep more military students in the system, Kirk said.

Revenue from taxing the new privately owned Navy homes will help, Kirk said, though the land

itself would remain off tax rolls. He also said he would push the Navy to turn over unused land at Great Lakes to North Chicago for development.

State Sen. Susan Garrett (D-Lake Forest) cast doubt on whether North Chicago would get the impact aid for the five years Kirk promised, noting that the Department of Education's letter did not specify a time. Only 36 months is guaranteed under a "hold-harmless provision," she said.

"It appears to me if we're going to extend past this 36 months, there should be an act of Congress, and we need more of a guarantee than what I heard here," she said at the meeting.

State Sen. Terry Link (D-Vernon Hills), whose district includes North Chicago, said: "When we talk about a five-year solution ... five years goes by pretty quick."

North Chicago officials have said that while the impact aid is important, District 187 still faces huge financial hurdles because of the schools' reliance on property taxes, which are low in comparison to wealthy neighbors in Lake Forest, Highland Park and Libertyville.

"This is really a Band-Aid, in our view, in terms of the financial needs of this school district," said District 187 Interim Supt. John Barbini. "The federal and state governments are going to have to work together to assist North Chicago in meeting its obligations in the future."

Because of the community's small tax base, the district still needs more funding aid, he said.

"To provide the quality of education our students need and deserve, we need to work cooperatively with state and federal governments to seek ways of additional funding," Barbini said.

Because the Navy also has housing at Ft. Sheridan, officials in Highland Park and Highwood hope that the government will extend the highest level of federal aid to the schools of all children whose parents work at Great Lakes.

Kirk said he supports that position.

"That's part of the long-term fix Sen. [Barack] Obama and I will be working on," he said.